

# **Taking Back the Industry: Understanding and Changing the Lack of Women's Representation in Film**

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## **Abstract**

Film is one of the most popular art forms as it combines both visual and audio elements and tells a wide range of stories. From date nights to spending time with family and friends, people around the world are frequently consuming film in theaters and at home, and naturally attempt to relate or see themselves in characters and in the stories. Unfortunately, although there have been many attempts to inspire change, the film industry severely lacks representation and inclusivity in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes roles. This is a major issue, as diverse characters and stories bring a sense of belonging to audiences and help people to feel less alone about their identity and experiences. For my research, I try to get to the root of this problem and find answers as to why representation is still extremely low in behind-the-scenes roles in film, which directly affects the level of representation in on-screen aspects of film. I will use previous studies and industry history for the first half of my research, and then interview women in the industry for the second half in hopes of inspiring the start of lasting change.

## Narrative

### Introduction:

Although there have been great strides in the industry that include films about women, BIPOC, and the LGBTQ+ community, the level of representation is nowhere near where it should be considering how much social change has occurred since the start of filmmaking. Curiously, women actually had a major role in the film industry's small beginnings, as they were hired as editors, "Because 'cutting' was considered menial and monotonous work similar to knitting and sewing, it became common for young women with little or no professional training to be hired as cutters" (Shambu, 2019). During their time working tirelessly as film editors, they formed strategies for filmmaking that eventually were noticed by men in the industry who decided the task was more advanced than initially understood. Most of the women working behind the scenes were purged over time while men took over the realm of editing, using the tactics and organization that women created. Even when most women did not work in the industry, a majority of film journalists were women, and they propelled the film industry forward, and made it more popular for a wider range of audiences (Hallett, 2013). Women also played a key role in creating celebrity culture and fan bases, "By the early 1920s, *Photoplay* claimed that women composed 75 percent of movie fans" (Hallett). The film industry has a lot to thank women for, as they worked both in and out of the industry to create better films and popularize them, yet this truth has been hidden through the years. Hollywood has been dominated by White men for decades, including today. In my research I plan to investigate why the representation of women in the behind-the-scenes aspect of film is so low, although there have been many movements for equality and women were central in making the industry what it is today by asking the question: What is the history and reasoning for the decrease of

representation in behind-the-scenes roles in filmmaking and how can the film industry increase diversity now and in the future?

### Background/Related Work and Motivation:

The history of the behind-the-scenes roles of film and the studies that observe representation in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes were shocking to me because women played such a formative role in the industry, yet due to discrimination, straight White men took over the industry and have held the power ever since. Both made me question why representation is still so low, and although there is a partial reason — straight White men dominating the industry — I struggle to find the “why?” factor. Why and how do White men stay in power when there are so many women, BIPOC, and members of the LGBTQ+ community fighting to have their voice heard in the industry? There have been many movements for change, yet nothing seems to make a big or lasting difference. A study conducted over the past twenty years proves this unchanging aspect of the industry, “The percentage of women working in key behind-the-scenes roles has barely budged in over two decades, increasing only 4 percentage points from 17% in 1998 to 21% in 2019” (Lauzen, 2020). Another study covering a recent decade of film looked even closer at women behind-the-scenes, specifically in editing, “Credited editing jobs across the sample of films totaled to 375, with 84.5% ( $n=317$ ) filled with males and 15.5% ( $n=58$ ) filled with females” (Smith et al., 2019). Not only is the film industry dominated by men, but it is also dominated by *White* men. There are both extreme racial and gender boundaries in the industry that are so extreme, making it all the more difficult for Women of Color to be heard. The lack of diversity in the behind-the-scenes roles in film directly affects on-screen roles, “A total of 4,454 speaking characters appeared across the 100 top films of 2017, with 68.2% male

and 31.8% female” (Smith et al., 2018). Although representation is ever so slightly better in on-screen roles, calling it acceptable would be horribly incorrect. If there is an increase in women in jobs behind-the-scenes, there will be an increase in female characters and women employment in on-screen elements. As a woman who aspires to join the film industry as an editor, this issue is very topical and directly affects me and many of my close friends who are fighting to work in the industry as well. We all want to tell our stories, and I want to inspire future generations of women to work in film as well. In finding the answers for my research question, I believe that many problems in the industry could be solved. By answering the question, “What is the history and reasoning for the decrease of representation in behind-the-scenes roles in filmmaking and how can the film industry increase diversity now and in the future?” we can get to the very root of the issue and work towards creating a plan for the future. I hope to inspire a start towards a change that will spark action and representation now and for generations to come.

#### Methods:

My methods for getting to the root of this major issue and starting the process of change begin with looking to the past. I will gather information from multiple historical accounts spanning from the start of filmmaking to present day in order to understand the context for the lack of representation. I will then analyze studies of representation of all women in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes roles; the more behind the scenes roles women hold, the more on-screen representation there is. Including studies will be very beneficial for providing evidence about this issue and emphasizing how representation has not changed as much as it should have over the years. Finally, with the context that I gathered, I will reach out to women in the film industry – being sure to interview women of all ages, races, and sexualities in order to cover all the basis and have a fully intersectional research process – and ask to interview them. Some

topics I will include in the interviews are: how they entered the industry, their personal experiences in their field, if they have experienced discrimination (whether it be explicit or implicit), and opinions on representation and lasting change in film.

### Expected Results:

I expect to inform and inspire with my research. By just reading my research paper that includes every piece of information and answers that I find, I hope people will take the time to truly think about this problem that affects women around the world fighting for jobs in the industry, women currently facing discrimination while working in the industry, and women who watch films that do not accurately portray their identity. The conversation about representation has already begun, yet the cause and weight of the problem has yet to be fully addressed. In the long run, I expect a fresh cycle in the industry to form that is as follows: More women (of all ages, races, and sexualities) are hired in the behind-the-scenes roles in the industry, which causes more stories to be written featuring this group, resulting in actors that belong to this intersectional group of women to be cast in the films telling these stories, which then inspires young girls and women to join the industry. It will take time for this cycle to be put in place, however the industry has lacked appropriate representation for much longer; it is worth it to take the time to create permanent change. By identifying the source of the problem and suggesting small changes, more people will accept the challenge to tackle this issue.

Conclusion:

In this proposal, I have addressed the lack of representation in the film industry, specifically the underrepresentation of women in the behind-the-scenes roles in filmmaking. My response is an in-depth period of research that will take place over the course of 9 weeks that includes the analysis of historical accounts, data from studies conducted throughout the years, and most importantly the interviewing of women who have worked and are currently working in the film industry. With the information gathered in my research, I believe I will find a concrete explanation for why women have been held back in the industry for so long, and I hope that this research and paper will be the spark that ignites lasting and meaningful change in the industry.

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**Budget****9 weeks**

Weeks 1 & 2	Weeks 3-5	Weeks 6-9
Gathering historical accounts, analysis, studies, and statistical data. Analyzing and collecting specific information to focus on.	Finding, locating, and reaching out to women of the film industry (currently working in/have worked in the past). Focus on including women of all ages, races, and sexualities.	Interviewing a select group of women who have worked/are currently working in the industry. Recording the findings and analyzing them.
12 hours x \$15.00 per hour	21 hours x \$15.00 per hour	28 hours x \$15.00 per hour
\$180.00	\$315.00	\$420.00
		<b>Total: \$915</b>